

**Remarks on the Situation in Iraq and an Exchange With Reporters**

*June 13, 2014*

*The President.* Good morning, everybody. I wanted to take some time to give you a quick update about the situation in Iraq.

Yesterday I convened a meeting with my National Security Council to discuss the situation there, and this morning I received an update from my team. Over the last several days, we've seen significant gains made by ISIL, a terrorist organization that operates in both Iraq and in Syria. In the face of a terrorist offensive, Iraqi security forces have proven unable to defend a number of cities, which has allowed the terrorists to overrun a part of Iraq's territory. And this poses a danger to Iraq and its people. And given the nature of these terrorists, it could pose a threat eventually to American interests as well.

Now, this threat is not brand new. Over the last year, we've been steadily ramping up our security assistance to the Iraqi Government with increased training, equipping, and intelligence. Now, Iraq needs additional support to break the momentum of extremist groups and bolster the capabilities of Iraqi security forces. We will not be sending U.S. troops back into combat in Iraq, but I have asked my national security team to prepare a range of other options that could help support Iraq security forces, and I'll be reviewing those options in the days ahead.

I do want to be clear though: This is not solely or even primarily a military challenge. Over the past decade, American troops have made extraordinary sacrifices to give Iraqis an opportunity to claim their own future. Unfortunately, Iraqis' leaders have been unable to overcome too often the mistrust and sectarian differences that have long been simmering there, and that's created vulnerabilities within the Iraqi Government as well as their security forces.

So any action that we may take to provide assistance to Iraqi security forces has to be joined by a serious and sincere effort by Iraq's leaders to set aside sectarian differences, to promote stability and account for the legitimate interests of all of Iraq's communities, and to continue to build the capacity of an effective security force. We can't do it for them. And in the absence of this type of political effort, short-term military action, including any assistance we might provide, won't succeed.

So this should be a wakeup call. Iraq's leaders have to demonstrate a willingness to make hard decisions and compromises on behalf of the Iraqi people in order to bring the country together. In that effort, they will have the support of the United States and our friends and our allies.

Now, Iraq's neighbors have—also have some responsibilities to support this process. Nobody has an interest in seeing terrorists gain a foothold inside of Iraq, and nobody is going to benefit from seeing Iraq descend into chaos. So the United States will do our part, but understand that ultimately, it's up to the Iraqis, as a sovereign nation, to solve their problems.

Indeed, across the region we have redoubled our efforts to help build more capable counterterrorism forces so that groups like ISIL can't establish safe haven. And we'll continue that effort through our support of the moderate opposition in Syria, our support for Iraq and its security forces, and our partnership with other countries across the region.

We're also going to pursue intensive diplomacy throughout this period both inside of Iraq and across the region, because there's never going to be stability in Iraq or the broader region unless there are political outcomes that allow people to resolve their differences peacefully without resorting to war or relying on the United States military.

We'll be monitoring the situation in Iraq very carefully over the next several days. Our top priority will remain being vigilant against any threats to our personnel serving overseas. We will consult closely with Congress as we make determinations about appropriate action, and we'll continue to keep the American people fully informed as we make decisions about the way forward. All right?

I'll take a question.

### *Iraq/Reconciliation Efforts*

Q. Mr. President, given the recent U.S. history there, are you reluctant to get involved again in Iraq?

*The President.* I think that we should look at the situation carefully. We have an interest in making sure that a group like ISIL, which is a vicious organization and has been able to take advantage of the chaos in Syria, that they don't get a broader foothold. I think there are dangers of fierce sectarian fighting if, for example, the terrorist organizations try to overrun sacred Shia sites, which could trigger Shia-Sunni conflicts that could be very hard to stamp out.

So we have enormous interests there. And obviously, our troops and the American people and the American taxpayers made huge investments and sacrifices in order to give Iraqis the opportunity to chart a better course, a better destiny. But ultimately, they're going to have to seize it. As I said before, we are not going to be able to do it for them. And given the very difficult history that we've seen in Iraq, I think that any objective observer would recognize that in the absence of accommodation among the various factions inside of Iraq, various military actions by the United States—by any outside nation—are not going to solve those problems over the long term and not going to deliver the kind of stability that we need.

Anybody else?

### *Syria/Iraq/Counterterrorism Efforts*

Q. Mr. President, is the Syrian civil war spilling over the Iraq border? And what can we do to stop it?

*The President.* Well, I think that's been happening for some time. ISIL has been able to gain a foothold in Syria. That's part of the reason why we've been so concerned about it. That's part of the reason why we've been supporting the Syrian opposition there. But it's a challenging problem.

In Iraq, the Iraqi Government, which was initially resistant to some of our offers of help, has come around now to recognize that cooperation with us on some of these issues can be useful. Obviously, that's not the case in Syria where President Asad has no interest in seeing us involved there, and where some of the governments that are supporting Asad have been able to block, for example, U.N. efforts even at humanitarian aid. But this is a regional problem and it is going to be a long-term problem.

And what we're going to have to do is combine selective actions by our military to make sure that we're going after terrorists who could harm our personnel overseas or eventually hit the homeland. We're going to have to combine that with what is a very challenging

international effort to try to rebuild countries and communities that have been shattered by sectarian war. And that's not an easy task.

#### *Iraq/International Diplomatic Efforts/Iraqi Armed Forces*

Q. Mr. President, which foreign countries have you been in touch with? And what are they willing to do as part of this international effort?

*The President.* Well, we're in contact with them now. So we'll have a better sense by the end of the weekend, after those consultations. And we will be getting a better sense from them of how they might support an effort to bring about the kind of political unity inside of Iraq that bolsters security forces.

Look, the United States has poured a lot of money into these Iraqi security forces, and we devoted a lot of training to Iraqi security forces. The fact that they are not willing to stand and fight and defend their posts against admittedly hardened terrorists, but not terrorists who are overwhelming in numbers, indicates that there's a problem with morale, there's a problem in terms of commitment. And ultimately, that's rooted in the political problems that have plagued the country for a very long time.

Last question. Last one.

#### *Iraq/Oil Supply and Refining/Reconciliation Efforts*

Q. Thank you. Can you talk a little bit about U.S. concern of the disruption of oil supplies?

*The President.* Well, so far, at least, we have not seen major disruptions in oil supplies. Obviously, if in fact ISIL was able to obtain control over major output, significant refineries, that could be a source of concern. As you might expect, world oil markets react to any kind of instability in the Middle East. One of our goals should be to make sure that in cooperation with other countries in the region not only are we creating some sort of backstop in terms of what's happening inside of Iraq, but if there do end up being disruptions inside of Iraq, that some of the other producers in the Gulf are able to pick up the slack. So that will be part of the consultations that will be taking place during the course of this week.

Just to give people a sense of timing here, although events on the ground in Iraq have been happening very quickly, our ability to plan, whether it's military action or work with the Iraqi Government on some of these political issues, is going to take several days. So people should not anticipate that this is something that is going to happen overnight. We want to make sure that we have good eyes on the situation there. We want to make sure that we've gathered all the intelligence that's necessary so that if in fact I do direct and order any actions there, that they're targeted, they're precise, and they're going to have an effect.

And as I indicated before—and I want to make sure that everybody understands this message—the United States is not simply going to involve itself in a military action in the absence of a political plan by the Iraqis that gives us some assurance that they're prepared to work together. We're not going to allow ourselves to be dragged back into a situation in which, while we're there, we're keeping a lid on things, and after enormous sacrifices by us, as soon as we're not there, suddenly, people end up acting in ways that are not conducive to the long-term stability and prosperity of the country.

All right, thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12 p.m. on the South Lawn at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) insurgent organization

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